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ABSTRACT

A discussion focusing on whether American Sign Language (ASL) should be accepted in fulfillment of university foreign language requirements attempts to dispel misconceptions about the language; and to show that ASL can provide the same benefits as the study of more traditional foreign languages, including the opportunity to communicate in another language and to learn about a different culture. The discussion highlights the following common questions and misconceptions about ASL: (1) Isn't ASL just a derivative of English?; (2) If ASL is American, how can it be considered a foreign language?; (3) Is ASL an important international language?; (4) What kind of culture is associated with ASL?; (5) Does ASL have a body of literature?; and (6) Will acceptance of ASL cause declining enrollments in traditional foreign languages? Issues universities should consider when choosing to accept ASL to fulfill the graduation requirement include curriculum design, teacher qualifications, student evaluation, and program location. (Author/VWL)

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Prepared by Sherman Wilcox

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

ERIC Digest

Foreign Language Requirement? Why Not American Sign Language?

Prepared By Sherman Wilcox

August 1989

American Sign Language (ASL) is the primary language of an estimated 100,000 to 500,000 Americans (Padden, 1987), including deaf native signers, hearing children of deaf parents, and adult deaf signers who have learned ASL from other deaf individuals. A growing population of hearing, second language students is learning ASL in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary classrooms.

While only one percent of secondary foreign language programs teach sign language (Rhodes & Oxford, 1988), second language instruction in ASL is rapidly gaining popularity. State laws in Alaska, California, Connecticut, Maine, Michigan, Texas, and Washington mandate that ASL can be used to meet high school foreign language graduation requirements. At the post-secondary level, sign language is taught in over 750 programs (Cokely, 1986). Many universities accept ASL for foreign language credit on an individual basis, and several universities have policies explicitly accepting ASL, including the University of New Mexico, the University of Minnesota, the University of Washington, and many private colleges. The University of California Committee on Educational Policy has recommended that ASL be accepted on all campuses in fulfillment of entrance and exit foreign language requirements.

Reluctance to give foreign language credit for ASL is often based on misconceptions about the language. This *Digest* will attempt to dispel those misconceptions, and to show that the study of ASL provides the same benefits as the study of more traditional foreign languages: the ability to communicate in an additional language, and an awareness and understanding of a different culture.

Common Questions and Misconceptions

❑ *Isn't ASL just a derivative of English?*

Because of its signed modality, people often incorrectly assume that ASL is fundamentally different from spoken languages, or that it is merely a contrived representation of English. ASL is a fully developed, natural language, one of the world's many signed languages. It is not a derivative of English; ASL contains structures and processes that English does not (Klima & Bellugi, 1979). ASL is not a 'simplified' language, but rather a complete language with its own unique grammar (Fromkin, 1988).

❑ *If ASL is American, how can it be considered a "foreign" language?*

ASL is indigenous to the United States and parts of Canada. This should not, however, exclude it from study as a foreign language. A language's place of origin has little to do with its status as a foreign language at most universities. While many languages indigenous to North America, such as American Indian Languages, are accepted in fulfillment of university foreign language requirements, languages from other countries are typically not accepted in the case of foreign students who are native speakers of the language. For reasons such as this, many language scholars now speak of second language instead of foreign language requirements.

❑ *Is ASL an important international language?*

ASL does perform a critical function in today's world of deaf international affairs and is, for example, an important language in international meetings such as the World Federation of the Deaf. A language's international status, however, does not play a major role in its acceptance for foreign language credit. Dutch has little influence in international affairs yet is acceptable as a foreign language; Farsi is a critical language in today's world, yet it enjoys only minimal support in foreign language departments.

❑ *What kind of culture is associated with ASL?*

Foreign language study necessarily involves learning about the values, world view, and way of life—the culture—of the people who use the language. ASL students learn about Deaf people's sense of identity, which sets them apart from the majority culture, and Deaf history, Deaf Arts, the social makeup of the Deaf community, and more (Gannon, 1981; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Wilcox, 1989).

❑ *Does ASL have a body of literature?*

While writing systems exist for ASL (McIntire *et al.*, 1988), none is widely used to record ASL literature. The lack of a writing system does not rule out the existence of a literary tradition in any language (Frishberg, 1988). ASL supports a body of folk literature by and about Deaf people (Rutherford, 1988). This literature has been recorded in permanent media, suitable for use in classrooms, since the turn of the century.

❑ *Will acceptance of ASL cause declining enrollments in traditional foreign languages?*

The University of New Mexico has observed, over the past ten years, that the demand for ASL courses has grown steadily. Since ASL was accepted in fulfillment of the foreign language requirement in 1986, there has been no indication that enrollment in other foreign language courses has been negatively affected. In fact, the popularity of ASL courses seems to have led to

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increased interest in other foreign languages as students overcome "foreign language anxiety" and discover the value of learning a new language.

Special Considerations

Universities that choose to accept ASL as a foreign language should consider several issues relating to the curriculum, qualifications of teachers, evaluation, and program location.

Curriculum. ASL courses should develop expressive and receptive fluency in natural communicative settings (Smith, 1988). ASL programs should provide students opportunities to interact with the Deaf community; this enhances students' competence in ASL and allows them to experience first-hand the customs and practices of Deaf culture. Deaf culture and ASL curricula, books, films, and videotapes, and other instructional materials are available from several publishers (see Resources).

Sometimes courses referred to as "American Sign Language" teach a manual version of English (Manually Coded English or MCE) or Pidgin Sign English (PSE); neither meets the requirements for a foreign language course. Universities should pay particular attention to this in accepting ASL for entrance requirements, or as transfer credit, and in assessing whether their existing courses meet the foreign language requirement.

Teacher Qualifications. ASL instructors should have a formal background in second language pedagogy, experience in teaching ASL, and verifiable proficiency in ASL (Kanda & Fleischer, 1988). One excellent method of maintaining high teacher qualifications is to require ASL instructors to hold certification from the Sign Instructors Guidance Network (see Resources).

Evaluation. Recent trends toward proficiency-based requirements apply equally well to ASL instruction. Proficiency guidelines from spoken language programs (Byrnes, 1983; Freed, 1983) should be used to develop proficiency-based, rather than seat-time, entrance and exit requirements.

Program Location. Existing ASL courses are often not taught in foreign language departments but in Speech, Education, or Communication Disorders departments; universities may need to make special provisions to provide foreign language credit in these situations. To avoid these problems, and because of the pedagogical connections between the study of ASL and other foreign languages, new ASL programs should be located in foreign language departments.

Conclusion

Students who know a foreign language often find that their perceptions of themselves and the world are richer than those of their monolingual peers (Edgerton, 1979). The study of a language, culture, and literature different from their own propels students beyond the limits of their own world (Bugos, 1980). In all respects, the study of ASL affords students the same challenges and rewards as more traditional foreign languages.

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Resources

Gallaudet University Press. 800 Florida Avenue, Washington, DC 20002.

Linstok Press, Inc. 9306 Mintwood Street, Silver Spring, MD 20901.

National Association of the Deaf. 814 Thayer Avenue, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

Sign Instructors Guidance Network. 445 Pennsylvania Street, Indianapolis, IN 46204.

T.J. Publishers, Inc. 817 Silver Spring Avenue, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

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